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ooo tasted of earth and bitter herbs when a commotion aroused us. Hurrying from the restaurant we saw Dupont's dog busy with carrion in a nearby field, surrounded by an excited huddle of vultures for whose benefit it had been exposed there. Dupont's cries of horror were interrupted by the whistle of the convoy-commander, who this time signalled for all officers to gather round
494 him. He told them that seventy Issaraks[1] were reported to be in
669 ambush, awaiting us at Kilometre 115 — about twenty miles further
725 on. They were turned out in new American uniforms, he said, and were well armed. At Kilometre 115 a cross-country track leading from Siam into Viet-Nam crossed our route. It occurred to both Dupont and myself that if this report was several hours old, it was not likely that the Issarak would be in the place where they were first seen. However, the official view taken was that they would not have moved more than five kilometres down the road in our direction, because orders were given for the infantry escort to dismount from their lorries at Kilometre 110 and to precede the convoy on foot for the next five kilometres. We noticed, too, that the officer assumed that the Issarak, if they had moved at all, would have inevitably marched towards us, and not in the other direction, because, once Kilometre 115 had been reached, the danger would be officially declared at an end, and the infantry ordered back into their lorries.

137 We now entered a country of low, bare hills; a whitish landscape, rarely animated by wandering pink-skinned buffaloes. In the hollows there were islands of splendid vegetation — flamboyant trees, arranged as if by design, with giant ferns and feathery bamboos. Peacocks gleamed in abandoned paddy fields, and storks, flapping away at our approach, trailed their legs in pools of yellow marsh-water. The vegetation was sensitive to quite small variations in altitude. The valley-bottoms were choked with bamboo thickets, and slender, segmented canes, wreathed in blue convolvulus, curved over our path like coachmen's whips, flicking us as we passed beneath. At this level the ditches were full of dead butterflies

[1] [i.e., "free men" of Laos and Cambodia. -- Analyst]

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A DRAGON APPARENT

000 Up till the last fraction of a second before a thousand graceful stems screened it from our view it was still upright and quite level. The soldiers in it had hardly risen from their seats and raised their arms not so much in alarm, it seemed, as to wave farewell.

Soon after, the infantry climbed down from the lorries and began their march in single file along the sides of the road in front. This manœuvre seemed to me not only useless but dangerous, since nothing could have been easier for ambushers than to let the soldiers go by and then destroy the defenceless vehicles. In the spirit of one who whistles in the dark to keep his courage up, the armoured car ahead occasionally opened up with its machine-guns and 2-cm. cannon, provoking, to the great discomfort of the following cars, one small forest fire. We never heard that the enemy
494 was other than imaginary. At five in the afternoon we crawled into the village of Vang Vieng, having done about twenty miles since mid-day.

133 Vang Vieng was just such another village as the one where we had had our mid-day Chinese soup, but it was set in the most staggering surroundings. Overhanging it was a range of mountains which were not very high, since the peaks only reached 8000 feet, but which did not look like any mountains I had ever seen before. There was no visual preparation by a gently rising foreground of foothills. These were stupendous walls of rock rising 4000, 5000 and 6000 feet sheer out of an absolutely flat plain. We were overhung, as it were, by a huge scrabbling in the sky, which at its base had been erased by mists. Dupont said that we would pass over these mountains that night.

494 It was at Vang Vieng that Dupont had planned to slip away. His
● 725 resolution was only slightly shaken when it was announced that the
6069 whole convoy would stay in the village overnight, owing to the presence of a small force of Viet-Minh, which the infantry would have to clear out, in a village fifteen kilometres further along the

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road; but as all the men were thoroughly tired this operation would be postponed till early next morning. Dupont was determined not to stay in Vang Vieng, but even he seemed to think twice about deliberately disobeying the convoy-commander's orders, and when he finally did so it was done in gentle stages, rather than in one flagrant act of insubordination. The excuse given for this phobia about Vang Vieng was that all the sleeping space would be taken up and we should find nowhere to stretch out comfortably.

We were still filthy from our travels; sweat-soaked and covered in bright yellow dust, through which the perspiration trickled down regular courses. As part of his campaign Dupont suggested that we should have a meal first and after that get permission from the convoy-commander to go for a bathe in a river, twelve kilometres down the road, where we should still be three kilometres short of the village with the Viet-Minh. Dupont described this river as if it had magical curative properties. It came out of a cave not far away, he said, and the water was icy cold. This course being agreed upon, we went to the usual Chinese eating-house run by one Sour Hak. Taken by surprise by our invasion, Sour Hak found himself short of food. However, as these villages are completely cut off during the six months' rainy season, there are always standbys for emergency. Reaching to the top of the cupboard he found a hunk of venison *boucané*, dusted it off and set it before us. This meat, prepared in a manner similar to that employed by the Argentine gauchos, was black, fine grained in texture as cheese, odourless and tasted slightly of liquorice. According to the usages of life in the bush, strips were cut off it with one's clasp knife. Fortunately, Sour Hak was found, quite mysteriously, to have a stock of first-rate Burgundy; doubtlessly bought in the belief that it was Algerian. Dupont's sudden optimism was only lowered by Sour Hak's refusal at any price to sell a green parakeet, which had flown in one day and attached itself to the house. Since tasting civilization nothing could persuade this bird to use its wings again, although like a true Laotian it enjoyed being taken for a ride on a bicycle. Dupont's

of Ayuthya. /45/ And even before it disappeared it had been supplanted by Vientiane, which was built some ten kilometers upstream, unless the two cities formed a single immense one or unless the first one moved without changing its name at first 175* 633 648* 631

Capture of Phaï-Nam (Vientiane) Whatever the case may be, the center of resistance against Fa-Ngoun was then called "Phaï-Nam" (thorny bamboos) because of the impenetrable vegetable belt which defended it like veritable ramparts. It resisted repeated assaults and Fa-Ngoun was able to get the better of it only by using a ruse. He had gold and silver projectiles shot at the bamboo enclosure and then simulated a retreat. The besieged army, seeing the royal troops fall back, thought that their delivery was at hand and came out to pick up the precious projectiles. Then the assailants suddenly returned to the charge and entered the city without difficulty (1). Phaya-Phao had to make his submission. 643* 721 175* 725 633 631

1. These tactics are celebrated in several Thaï legends to explain the capture of a stronghold.

He received his pardon and was kept on as governor of the principality.

In memory of this episode, the city was baptized /46/ "Vien-Kham" which signifies "gold enclosure." This was later corrupted to "Vientiane" (sandalwood enclosure) (1)

1. There is permanent confusion in the Laotian chronicles between the Vien-Kham on the banks of the Mékong and the Vien-Kham in Tran-Ninh.

Formation of the kingdom of Lan-Xang (1353). Fa-Ngoun, henceforth the uncontested master of a vast kingdom, gave it a strong organization and ruled over it as a despot. 643* 175* 642

He summoned an Oupahat or second king to him to assist him in his political duties and instituted a Council of ministers chosen from the princes of royal blood and arranged in a hierarchy according to their respective ranks and attributions. But he would suffer no infringement on his own authority, neither at court or in the provinces. He took terrible reprisals against the vassals who did not obey his orders blindly, and replaced nearly all of them in succession with mere governors as the fancy took him. /646/